

Melike Kara's Striking Canvases Go On View at Salon 94

The buzzy artist's first U.S. solo show this fall follows acclaimed exhibitions at Shanghai and Rotterdam

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Recent paintings in oil stick and acrylic by Melike Kara that were on view at the Witte de With Center Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. Photo: Kristien Daem; Courtesy of the artist, Jan Kaps, and Peres Projects

Melike Kara's bold, sumptuous paintings resist easy interpretation. Androgynous figures rendered in hues of blue, green, or purple dance across the canvas, resembling masked commandos or primitive tribespeople, with indeterminate gender, ethnicity, and social status. "They are equally everyone and everywhere," the young talent says from her light-filled studio in Cologne, Germany, where she lives and works. "What they do have is a body, a heart: They feel love, joy, fear, anger. The canvases capture that."

Born and raised in Germany, Kara is also part of a Kurdish Alevi family that was forced to flee Turkey due to persecution—a theme that Kara has only recently started to explore more actively in her art. "In the beginning, it was definitely a deliberate decision to leave it all behind, the idea of belonging to my identity and the political tensions of being both German and Kurdish. I wanted to see what was left," she says. In a show this past winter at her Cologne gallery, Jan Kaps, she displayed a highly personal video, *Emine* (2018), which depicts her aging grandmother, the only one in her family who still speaks their native Zazaki language. "There's an inner dialogue going on," says Kara. "What does it mean to have Kurdish roots? I don't have an answer yet."



êpiya, and Vêsaniya [in front], 2019. I hear the tongues [center], 2019. Tiefe Schluchten langer Schnee [right], 2018. Installation view Melike Kara, new work at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2019.

Photo: Kristien Daem; Courtesy of the artist, Jan Kaps, and Peres Projects

Kara starts each day in the studio by lighting candles at a shrine and sometimes reading a poem. She forgoes sketching and begins by directly painting from one end of the canvas. “Because I’m unsure what will happen when I get to the center, I give all that uncertainty and chaos in my mind something to work with,” says the painter of her restricted color palette.

Kara studied under the great sculptor Rosemary Trockel and credits the conceptual artist Iza Genzkin as an inspiration. “Artists and people can leave traces within you that you don’t see directly or immediately until you really look.”

It’s been a buzzy few years for Kara, who is also represented by Peres Projects in Berlin. She’s had acclaimed exhibitions at the Yuz Museum in Shanghai and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. (The latter show recently ended August 25th.) Upcoming is her first solo exhibition Stateside, at Salon 94 in New York in September. “I first saw her canvases at an art fair, and they immediately caught my attention,” says Salon 94 founder Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn. “These figures appear engaged in some act of healing yet sit so comfortably on the canvas, as though they’d been there forever. Something extraordinary is taking place.”